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CRM 90-126 / August 1990

AD-A230 644

# Civilian-Military Differences on Soviet Aircraft Carrier Deployment

Scott R. Atkinson



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# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved  
OPM No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources gathering and maintaining the data needed, and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, Office of Management and Budget, Washington, DC 20503.

1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave Blank)		2. REPORT DATE August 1990		3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED Final	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Civilian-Military Differences on Soviet Aircraft Carrier Deployment				5. FUNDING NUMBERS C - N00014-87-C-0001 PE - 65154N PR - R0148	
6. AUTHOR(S) Scott R. Atkinson					
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Center for Naval Analyses 4401 Ford Avenue Alexandria, Virginia 22302-0268				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER CRM 90-126	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
12a. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Cleared for Public Release; Distribution Unlimited				12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE	
13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words) An open debate has erupted in the Soviet press on the future of Soviet carrier deployment. The debate generally pits civilians, in particular the specialists at the Academy of Sciences, against the military (and especially naval) high command. The civilians question the costs and efficacy of the carrier program, while military spokesmen have defended it. This research memorandum examines the debate by focusing on two recent articles that present the key arguments of both sides.					
14. SUBJECT TERMS Aircraft carriers, Civilian personnel, Decision making, Defense planning, Deployment, Military advisors, Military personnel, Military planning, Policies, Soviet press, USSR, Naval personnel, Naval planning				15. NUMBER OF PAGES 10	
				16. PRICE CODE	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT CPR	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE CPR	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT CPR	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT SAR		

NSN 7540-01-280-5500

Standard Form 298, (Rev. 2-89)  
Prescribed by ANSI Std. Z39-18  
299-01



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7 September 1990

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Subj: CNA Research Memorandum 90-126

Encl: (1) CNA Research Memorandum 90-126, *Civilian-Military Differences on Soviet Aircraft Carrier Deployment*, by Scott R. Atkinson, Unclassified, August 1990

1. Enclosure (1) is forwarded as a matter of possible interest.
2. This research memorandum examines the open debate that has erupted in the Soviet press on the future of Soviet carrier deployment. The debate generally pits civilians, in particular the specialists at the Academy of Sciences, against the military (and especially naval) high command. The civilians question the costs and efficacy of the carrier program, while military spokesmen have defended it. This paper examines this debate by focusing on two recent articles that present the key arguments of both sides.

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## ABSTRACT

An open debate has erupted in the Soviet press on the future of Soviet carrier deployment. The debate generally pits civilians, in particular the specialists at the Academy of Sciences, against the military (and especially naval) high command. The civilians question the costs and efficacy of the carrier program, while military spokesmen have defended it. This research memorandum examines the debate by focusing on two recent articles that present the key arguments of both sides.

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## INTRODUCTION

Glasnost, as is now widely acknowledged, has opened up many topics in Soviet society that were previously taboo. The armed forces' structure and missions are issues that have been discussed recently with new candor. Until now, in the realm of military matters, glasnost has placed most attention on the Red Army. However, the Soviet Navy is also drawing increasing attention.

One of the most important trends in the glasnost era, as far as defense is concerned, is the emergence of the *institutchiki*--civilian specialists on defense issues. Although these specialists had previously been rather inconsequential in influencing policy, under Gorbachev they have become very assertive in challenging the military advocacy of certain defense policies. As a result, they have won several defense debates, such as those over unilateral force reductions and the definition of the defensive doctrine "reasonable sufficiency." At the same time, the military leadership, having recovered from the initial shock of glasnost, seems to be regaining its feet and is defending its policies more adroitly than previously.

Two recent articles in the Soviet press serve as a prime example of the challenge from the civilian specialists and the military's response to them. In questioning the need for more aircraft carriers, Andrei Kortunov and Igor Malashenko provide a good overview of the civilians' approaches to international security, defense, and war-fighting strategy.<sup>1</sup> Captain Kozyrev, on the other hand, provides the opposing military view on the matter of carriers and on much more related to defense policy.<sup>2</sup> Almost surely backed by the senior Navy and other military officials, Kozyrev defends Soviet "aircraft-carrying cruisers" in a detailed, careful manner.

### THE CIVILIAN VIEW: KORTUNOV AND MALASHENKO

Kortunov and Malashenko downplay the effectiveness of Soviet carriers in all the potential missions for which they may be intended. If countering U.S. carrier groupings is the goal, they ask, then why not respond, as has been done effectively in the past, by improving submarines and shore-based aviation.<sup>3</sup> If the goal is to create a military threat to U.S. coastlines, then that goes against the new defensive doctrine. They seem to view the "showing the flag" mission in the Third World as being guilty of the same violation. Notably, in both cases, the authors have taken it upon themselves to act as defenders of the new doctrine against, presumably, military leaders.<sup>4</sup>

However, the authors cast doubt on the validity of what is most likely the key mission Soviet naval planners had in mind for their carriers:

Deployment of *Tbilisi*-class ships, in our view, attests to the fact that the Soviet naval strategy remains oriented on the possibility of a protracted non-nuclear large-scale naval conflict when the enemy will try to break through to the Soviet strategic centers ashore. It is presumed that main battles will unfold on the high seas, as was the case during WW2 in the Pacific.

And their further critique:

If today the enemy sets himself the task of destroying the Soviet fleet's main forces at their home bases, eliminating Soviet SSBNs and delivering strikes against our territory, such a conflict will inevitably grow into a nuclear war. It will be impossible to keep the conflict balancing on the brink of the "textbook" naval warfare and any attempts to allow the possibility of limited naval action in these circumstances are not only futile, but also dangerous, since they lower the threshold of war.

Thus the authors maintain that such a war will automatically escalate into a full-scale nuclear exchange. As a result, there is no need for expensive conventional war-fighting options such as those in which the *Tbilisi* might be involved. Proponents of carrier deployment, by contrast, seem to be saying that hostilities need not grow into a nuclear war.

The two academicians also stress the vulnerability of carriers--both U.S. and Soviet--and express doubt about whether the USSR could ever "expect its ships to be as reliable as American ones."

Kortunov and Malashenko emphasize the political and economic aspects of carrier deployment, as is typical of the *institutchiki*. First, the financial costs (which have been kept secret, they complain) are very heavy,<sup>5</sup> and exceed the benefits. Second, the "economic potentials" of the two sides must be considered, a calculation that shows that the burden of defense spending (and carrier deployment) falls much harder on the USSR, with its much weaker economy. Third, the USSR must resist U.S. attempts to draw it into an economically ruinous arms race. And fourth, deployments could negatively affect political relations with nations in the vicinity of the ships' operations.

Notably, the authors also state that Soviet aircraft carrier deployment does not take into account "the differences in the two superpowers' geostrategic positions" and "historical ways of military development." In other words, the USSR is a land power facing

terrestrial threats, and the U.S. is a naval power.<sup>6</sup> It is remarkable that these and other *institutchiki* have defended U.S. naval power on this basis and the fact that, with substantial overseas trade, U.S. naval power has an economic rationale.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the authors call for "all-around discussion and thorough analysis" of the deployment, as well as examination in the Supreme Soviet. In this way the deliberations over deployment would be expanded to include experts such as themselves.

Another prominent member of the *institutchiki* to attack the carriers recently was Georgii Atbatov, director of the Academy of Sciences' Institute of USA and Canada. He spoke disparagingly of the carriers, and bemoaned the secrecy surrounding their costs, in a December 1989 "Studio 9" TV program and thereafter in testimony before the Congress of People's Deputies.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE MILITARY VIEW: CAPTAIN KOZYREV

Captain 1st rank S. Kozyrev responded to the Kortunov-Malashenko *New Times* article in the February 1990 issue of *Morskoi sbornik* (Naval Digest). Kozyrev opposed most of their arguments.

Kozyrev begins by refuting the notion that the Soviet Union has aircraft carriers. He refers to them in the traditional Soviet terms as "aircraft-carrying cruisers," which, he asserts, are distinct from aircraft carriers because of their more limited capabilities and missions.

Kozyrev believes that the main mission of these vessels is to provide air cover for fleet forces. More specifically, they are to defend battle groups from "means of aerial attack" and surface combatants. The chief means of achieving this mission are both fighters and surface-to-surface missiles.

In order to repel the threat that U.S. forces pose to the USSR, Kozyrev says, one must do more than concentrate Soviet naval assets in protective areas. One must go into those regions where enemy forces have been positioned,

force them out of the region, and, finally, in the event of the outbreak of war, engage them in battle.

Our submarines and land-based strike and antisubmarine aviation are mainly responsible for carrying out such missions. However, deploying forces into these regions for battle with the specific bearers of the threat demands the securing of a reliable cover, and first of all from means of aerial attack (SVN) of the enemy.

Otherwise, he adds, Soviet submarines and aviation will be unable to reach those areas where enemy forces have concentrated, that is, they will be eliminated en route. The regions to be reached, he notes, are outside the zones of effective operation for shore-based fighters. As a result, Kozyrev concludes that there are no alternatives to "aircraft-carrying cruisers" for providing cover in those areas.

Kozyrev sees no contradiction between these functions and the defensive doctrine. He insists that there is no mission to use the vessels to interdict sea lanes of communication or to attack coastal targets of the potential enemy, as Kortunov and Malashenko seem to be suggesting.

Kozyrev disagrees with Malashenko and Kortunov on the issue of costs and benefits as well. He sees the carriers lowering the level of expected losses in battle and the costs of carrying out tasks; they only augment existing fighting capabilities of the "genuinely essential" battle groups. Savings occur in not having to build other special ships and systems for their protection. Kozyrev shows sensitivity to the economic calculus in another way as well. He claims that the deployment of Soviet "aircraft-carrying cruisers" is an asymmetric response to the U.S. Navy, and by no means a ruinous imitation effort. In portraying the deployment in this manner, Kozyrev contradicts Kortunov and Malashenko, while indicating his agreement with the now-prevalent line that the USSR "allowed itself to be pulled into an arms race in the past."

Kozyrev also finds fault with Kortunov and Malashenko's understanding of the threat.

To think that it [the threat] is limited to a few "strategic centers" on the coast, fleet basing points and naval forces at sea or in port, is wrong. The assumption that the enemy's fleet must closely approach our shores to achieve his designated tasks is a similarly deep miscalculation.

In fact, he notes, U.S. sea-based missiles can strike targets practically anywhere in the USSR from sites thousands of kilometers from Soviet shores. Only the Soviet Navy, he contends, can neutralize this threat.

Kozyrev also challenges the notion of the carriers' vulnerability. "The experience of the Second World War, local wars, and postwar armed conflicts convincingly testifies to the fact that the carrier is one of the least vulnerable naval targets." At the same time, he acknowledges that the carrying out of defensive missions in the event of a nuclear conflict is "problematic," that is, their vulnerability is greater.

However, he disagrees with the civilians' assessment that any war will inevitably escalate to nuclear, a necessary argument for promoting carrier deployment.

At the geopolitical level, Kozyrev also disagrees with the Kortunov-Malashenko formula that the USSR is a continental power while the U.S. is a naval power; he calls the Soviet Union "a great sea power."

#### OTHER MILITARY SUPPORT FOR CARRIER DEPLOYMENT

Kozyrev's article provides the most detailed defense to date of Soviet carrier deployment. However, other military figures, including Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Navy, V. Chernavin, and Chief of the General Staff, Mikhail Moiseyev, have also voiced support for deployment. Chernavin claims carrier deployment does not contradict a defensive posture. In a recent interview, he accused "certain people" (read: the *institutchiki*) of having a "simplistic and primitive understanding" of defense.

They [certain people] think that since we have adopted this doctrine, we should be purely passive, defend ourselves, and, in the event of conflict, retreat deep into our territory. Yet modern warfare--be it on land, sea, or in the air--is, above all, fluid. How can a warship fight if it "sits in the trenches?" Submarines should find the enemy and sink them. A surface ship's mission is, if necessary, to inflict missile strikes on the enemy without waiting for them to enter our territorial waters.<sup>9</sup>

Chernavin has also stressed the potential for U.S.-Soviet confrontation. In the same interview, Chernavin said that the "risk of military confrontation at sea is as great as on land, if not greater." This tendency, he adds, is increasing.<sup>10</sup> Such an emphasis comes in marked contrast to most statements of the political and military leaders, who often observe that tensions have lessened and the danger of war has diminished lately.

Chief of the General Staff Moiseyev supports carrier deployment as well:

Some publications raise the question of whether, given the limited nature of our funds, it is sensible to resort to similar actions--to build heavy aircraft

carriers and large nuclear submarines and other expensive equipment. To me the answer is clear: The miser pays twice. Here, as in the development of space, you cannot lag behind, you will not catch up later.<sup>11</sup>

Chernavin may foresee a role for carriers in the context of the missions of the much-noted V'yunenکو book, which he seems to support.<sup>12</sup> This book, *The Navy: Its Role, Prospects For Development and Employment*, calls for "repelling the enemy's aerospace attack," suppression of the enemy's military-economic potential, and destruction of enemy armed force groupings. More specifically, this means destroying U.S. and allied naval forces before they can launch missile strikes, destroying Western and U.S. military targets through nuclear missile strikes from Soviet submarines, and destroying hostile naval forces to gain command of the seas on the Eurasian periphery, as well as military targets in the adjacent ground theaters. The latter aim could entail the use of carrier battle groups. In promoting these missions, Chernavin and other naval officers traditionally emphasize the threat posed by U.S. naval forces.

Curiously accompanying this promotion of the V'yunenکو missions are indications that, in a time of phased arms reductions, the Soviet Navy expects to emerge in a relatively better condition than the other services. Admiral I. Kapitanets, in a July 1989 interview, said that although reductions have already affected the Soviet Navy, the "scale of the process is significantly less than in the other services of the armed forces."<sup>13</sup> Captain 2nd Rank Valeriy Myasnikov, writing in the *APN Military Bulletin*, states that, with unavoidable cuts in U.S. land and air forces forthcoming, the role of the U.S. Navy is to increase, as will at-sea time near the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> Such an eventuality, no doubt, would enhance the negotiating position of the Soviet Navy in a time of economic constraints; Myasnikov's statement is likely a case for increased funding for the Soviet Navy to counter the threat.

## CONCLUSIONS

How the debate on carrier deployment and larger missions of the Soviet Navy will emerge is hard to predict. The carrier debate is one of several defense issues being argued under glasnost conditions. Previously, such disagreements were usually hidden from public view, or were obscured by Aesopian or cryptic language. Thus the circumstances, players, and arguments that led to the decision were difficult to detect. Under Gorbachev, this situation is changing, and the result is that far more can be learned from reading the Soviet open literature than previously.

## NOTES

1. Andrei Kortunov and Igor Malashenko, "'Tblisi,' 'Riga,' and the Rest?" *New Times*, No. 51 (December), 1989, pp. 26-28.
2. Captain 1st Rank S. Kozyrev, "'Tblisi,' 'Riga,' and the Others...", *Morskoi sbornik*, No. 2 (February), 1990, pp. 13-17.
3. This argument has also been taken by Aleksei Arbatov, another civilian specialist. Aleksei Arbatov, "How Much Defense Is Necessary?" *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizh'*, March 1989, p. 46.
4. Both arguments again match Arbatov's line. Arbatov called Soviet naval confrontation with the U.S. in areas of Third World conflict "the most unwinnable area of rivalry for us, extremely expensive, and not directly connected with the security of the USSR and its main allies." *Ibid.*, p. 45.
5. As expected, the authors also bemoan the absence of published data on the costs of Soviet carriers. *Institutchiki* complaints about excessive military secrecy have been common the last few years.
6. This point has also been made by Igor Malashenko in another article, "The Pause After the 'Changing of the Guard,'" *Novoye vremya*, No. 18, 1989, pp. 10-11.
7. Sergey Blagovolin, "Military Power--How Much and Why?" *MEiMO*, No. 8, 1989, p. 8. Blagovolin repeats his criticism of Soviet carrier deployment in his "Geopolitical Aspects of Defense Sufficiency," *MEiMO*, No. 3, 1990, pp. 118-119.
8. "'Studio 9' Debates Bush-Gorbachev Malta Talks," *FBIS-SOV*, December 13, 1989, p. 6.
9. V. Chebakov interview with Fleet Admiral V. N. Chernavin, "Commentary by Fleet Admiral Chernavin, Commander in Chief of the Navy," *Pravda*, October 19, 1989, p. 3.
10. N. Sautin interview with Admiral Chernavin, "Not A Sword But a Shield!" *Izvestiya*, February 23, 1989, pp. 1, 3; V. Chernavin, "To Be Prepared for Modern Battle," *Morskoi sbornik*, No. 1, 1989, p. 3.
11. V. Litovkin interview with Chief of the General Staff M. Moiseyev, "Argumenty generalnogo shtaba," *Izvestiya*, February 23, 1990, p. 3.

NOTES (Continued)

12. See his interview with *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, February 1989, pp. 75-76.

13. Interview with I. M. Kapitanets, "Responsibility for the Honor and Glory of the Fleet," *Agitator armii i flota*, No. 14, 1989, p. 2.

14. Captain 2nd Rank Valerii Myasnikov, "How and Why Is the U.S. 'Forward-Based Strategy' Changing?" *Voyennyi vestnik*, N14, (68), July 1989, pp. 1-2.